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ABSTRACT

The current system of elementary level reading instruction allows no place for reading for pleasure. While few deny the teacher's role in helping children master the mechanics of reading, some question whether it is equally important to help children learn the inherent pleasure of reading literature for its own sake. The current systems approach to reading instruction, which is supported from many ranks, also precludes reading for pleasure, perpetuating isolated skills and making teachers the tool of the method instead of the other way around. The form and format of basal readers used in reading instruction confuse the reader who is reading for either pleasure or information because basals are not literary constructs with a beginning, middle, and end, but rather a series of unrelated and interrupted reading episodes. The exercises that occur before, during, and after a basal reading passage bear no resemblance to what a reader does before, during, and after pleasure reading. Ensuring a place for pleasure reading in the 1980s requires (1) giving teachers moral, professional, and financial support to challenge the systems approach; (2) providing children with the time, the physical and human environment, and the materials to encourage pleasurable reading; and (3) counting teacher successes rather than failures. (HTH)

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What Place Pleasure in the Reading Systems

--Shelton L. Root, Jr.

The theme for this series of lectures is "Reading for Pleasure: Implications for the 80's." Within this framework, each of us has been encouraged to fashion a presentation that reflects his or her concerns about reading for pleasure during the decade that lies ahead.

It has been a full thirty years since I faced my first elementary school class and, during all of those years, I have become increasingly concerned--alarmed is a more appropriate word--over the negative consequences that basal reading instruction may have on reading for pleasure. Because this alarm is now one of major magnitude, I have chosen to entitle my presentation, "What Place Pleasure in the Reading Systems?"

The title is, quite obviously, a rhetorical question. One to be answered late in the presentation because, if answered too early, the audience might well be lost. Nonetheless, I'll take the chance. There is no place for pleasure in the reading systems!

Now that the statement has been made the challenge is to explain it--not to defend it; for I believe it is not appropriate to defend the obvious. Attack seems the only adequate response. Compromise, or trench warfare, has illy served reading for pleasure; it has only weakened it by attrition.

The following observations, I hope, will furnish substance to support what may seem pure heresy to some. Although there is little linear logic among these observations, I hope you will find internal logic as you arrange and re-arrange them within the context of your own thinking.

First, what reading for pleasure is and is not. Reading is not a mindless spinning of the television dial, a la Peter Sellers in Being There. It should be reading for recreation, the result of which is re-creation--coming away from

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the reading experience somehow different, somehow more aware, if even consciously, of one's own values. Hopefully, somehow more human and more humane. Reading for pleasure does not insure that such consequences will prevail. It can only provide the opportunity for them to occur. This does not infer that the material read need be ponderously frought with significance. It must, however, be worthy of the reader's engagement.

Though there are few who would deny the teacher's role in helping children master the mechanics of reading to the end that they can vie in the economic world, some question whether it is equally important to help children learn the inherent pleasures of reading literature for its own sake. I, for one, believe the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive and that the teacher's responsibility is at least equally important in both realms. In the first instance, it is relatively easy to know how well we are succeeding. It is in the second instance that the teacher faces a great dilemma; encouraging children to read for pleasure, while offering them what little guidance we can, is almost an act of pure faith. There is no way on God's earth that we can <u>insure</u> that all children will become readers for pleasure. But it is an act of faith that commits us, despite our occasional doubts, to the proposition that children can find something worth their while in reading for pleasure. It is the teacher's responsibility to help them find it.

"Worth <u>their</u> while" is a key phrase here. All one owns in this world worth anything is one's own while. It is the coin of life, and no matter what we do with children, the only evaluative question of consequence is: Will it be, is it, and was it worth their whiles? If so, then it is worth our whiles to teach.

The second observation. Recreational, or pleasure reading, has never been high on the ordinary citizen's list of national priorities. In fact, those who read too much have always been more than a bit suspect. It is often

viewed by the Earnest Achievers in Life as an idling away of time that might better be spent on something <u>really</u> important.

Before we go any farther with this matter of reading for pleasure in the '80s, which everyone seems to be for, we had better find out how deeply we are committed to it, because if we are deeply committed, then that commitment demands a revolution in the classroom.

There are many who are committed! If for this reason alone: Reading for pleasure is a contemplative, self-involving act, it is not passive receptivity. It is an act that encourages the reader to search for and assert his or her own individuality. It is a domain over which one rules in total suzerainty--a domain created with the help of the author, but one which is beyond the control of anyone, other than the reader's. It is the one art form we print-bounded people are best equipped to help our childrem come to know.

Through reading, it is possible that vast numbers can become artists, and nothing is more desperately needed to cope with the coming 80s and 90s and two-thousands than a multitude of artist readers! It is our responsibility, yours and mine, to help insure that such a multitude emerges. Just as artists of whatever mediums are needed to help us see and feel and know the dilemmas and promises of our society, so are artist readers needed to understand and interpret those artists of print form to others who have not mastered the art of reading for pleasure.

Third, if there is commitment to reading for pleasure--reading as an art form--then we are confronted with the problem of leisure, and leisure equates with time: time for pleasure (the words leisure and pleasure derive from the same Latin origins), time for speculation, time for introspection, and time for healthy self-indulgence. The nub of which is that, if we are committed to reading for pleasure, then we are automatically committed to providing the leisure time in which that reading can take place.

Therein lies another aspect of the revolution. It never was safe to take for granted that, if children acquired their reading skills in school, they would automatically apply them to reading for pleasure out of school. If we honestly want children to learn to read for pleasure, to acquire the habit of reading as a leisure activity, then we must provide them a protected time and an environment conducive to such an understanding.

My fourth observation. Reading systems, and I chose the term systems deliberately to point out how the monster has grown from the 64 page New England Primer, which concluded with far harder reading matter than do our present-day eighth-grade texts, and which was intended to prime, or prepare, one for reading--reading systems have evolved through readers, through basal texts, through basal series to the current behemoth; much to the detriment of both teacher and reader.

Physically, the Primer never got in one's way, in its earliest version, it measured 2½" x 3½" and weighed less and 1½ ounces. The system on the other hand, present problems of considerable dimension. The three parts of just one grade level's worth of a particular teacher's edition measure 8½ by 11 by 3 inches and weighs 5 pounds. Despite my convictions that we are better teachers now than we were in the old days, I don't think that this increase in bulk has contributed much to our improvement.

Intellectually, the metamorphosis has been particularly detrimental in that it has changed demands on the teacher. When all one had was a 64 page book to move the youngster from beginning to adult reading, it certainly encouraged inventive genius to keep things going. It also motivated the teacher to tell his or her students to go find something else to read. Today's system discourages teacher innovation. There is far too much already laid out to be done.

The fifth observation, in which are itemized some of the inherent matters that make the reading systems approach counter-productive to helping children

become readers for pleasure.

A. The very meaning of the term, as it is now used (it is the "systems approach" so commonly employed by the military and by industry) is that of a sequence of mechanisms or manipulations through which raw material, tangible or intangible, passes to become a predetermined product. Such systems are designed in order to minimize or eliminate human error and, because the best systems are those which are least fallible, they limit, or eliminate, human variability. Insofar as they do, the range of interaction between teacher and learner is restricted, and the range of response between reader and text is predetermined. Action, reaction, and interaction are encouraged only to the extent that they allow the raw material, the student, to move through the system on a standardized time continuum. Time becomes the dominant factor in the equation. To be efficient, systems encourage those teaching, learning, and response styles that are compatible with it, and discourage or eliminate those which are not.

B. Reading systems invert the entire teacher-teaching tool relationship in that it is the system which now uses the teacher, not the teacher who uses the system. The teacher is now an extension of the tool, rather than the tool being an extension of the teacher. Claim what can be claimed for the systems offering a stimulating variety of options, they are options within narrowly prescribed limits, nearly all of which are stultifying rather than stimulating.

It is not difficult to accept the magnitude of inversion when one realizes where the burden of blame now rests when too many children fail to learn to read, as measured by standardized tests (another False God in the Pantheon of Pedagogy).

What happens when too many children don't do well on standardized reading tests? It is quite simple. A committee is appointed to spend endless hours examining competing basal systems, many of which actually vary little one from the other. The committee, in it's ultimate wisdom selects one. And the teachers are off the hook, as long as they adhere the teacher's editions of the newly

annointed system. The stars are all in place and all is, once again, right in the Educational Heavens.

Well, right for a while, at least. But basal adoption is rather like the itch. It recurs about every seven years, when it again becomes obvious that too many kids aren't reading up to grade level. (Whatever that really means.) Again a committee is formed. Again it heeds the siren's call of one system or another. And, again the whole tragic drama is reinacted. Will we never learn?

May I ask, what was so wrong with the solution of firing the incompetent teacher a getting a better one when children didn't learn? What we are doing now is rather like encouraging an inept surgeon to continue to operate as long as he or she changes scapels periodically.

The truth of the matter is that the basal system is merely a microcosmic manifestation of one of the tremendous dilemmas we all face--how, in this increasingly faceless system, do we show our faces? Or had we, in self-preservation, better hide them?

C. The form and format of the basal confuses the reader who is reading for pleasure, information or indeed, any purpose at all other than doing better on tests. It is not a literary construct with a logical beginning, middle, and end. In that sense, it defies literary predictability. Rather, it is a series of literarily unrelated and interrupted reading episodes. It is not "book reading" as you and I have come to understand the term. Instead, the basal insures the reader a series of spasmodic, electro-shock treatments as it jerks him or her from poetry to prose to informational to sign language to drama to non-fiction form, with the reading rhythms and sets demanded by one form being inappropriate for the next. Basals are not even anthologies, because true anthologies are organized around some set of literary principles.

With all due respect to the authors and organizers of basals, I am sure there is some underlying logic behind them. But, for the life of me, I can't discover it. I've come to suspect that the basal is a sort of print hybred, resulting from the conflicting logics and philosophies of its various builders.

D. The purposes which the basals serve are seldom the purposes which serve the reader-for-pleasure. It comes as no news to anyone who reads for pleasure that what one does before, during, and after one reads bears absolutely no resemblance to what one does before, during, and after reading a basal selection for instruction. And it should be remembered that the very purpose one has for reading defines the reading act.

The skills involved in reading for pleasure seem little understood and little emphasized by the basal authors, and are ones that those who do read for pleasure have, for the most part, learned on their own.

When the pleasure reader comes to the end of a selection, he may, or may not, take time right then to reflect on it, to ponder over it. If the reading has had import, the selection may work through the reader's innards for days and weeks. It is even probable that the reader will never consciously intellectualize the impact of that reading experience. There is little likelihood that he or she will start to answer questions about it, or discuss the selection's deeper meanings and implications right away. Particularly not in public! And there is no likelihood at all that the reader will even consider undertaking skill-building exercises based on what has just been read.

Despite claims to the contrary--the opening sentence of one teacher's edition of a currently popular system reads, "Stimulating young people's love of literature and developing their abilities to interpret and understand what they read are the main goals of this series"--despite such claims, even a cursory examination of any of the major systems indicates beyond reasonable doubt that the main goal of reading systems is to teach the mechanics of reading, not to stimulate the love of literature.

For example, let us examine one lesson from this series which professes "stimulating young people's love of literature" as one of its main goals.

The literature selection is E. B. White's Charlotte Web--not all of it, just the front seven pages. What follows is the text from the teacher's edition with my observations interjected.

Comprehension/Literary Skills

(The letters mean: R = review, T = test, I = introduce.)

1. R-T To use synonyms to determine the meaning of selected story words.
2. R To describe a given character in a selection in terms of explicit and implicit character traits.
3. I To identify an author's use of idiomatic words or expressions in a selection.
4. R To distinguish fact from opinion in a selection.
5. R To identify elements of fact within fiction writing.
6. R To identify pronoun referents in a selection.

Decoding/Encoding Skills

R-T To identify these spellings for the phoneme /ɔ/ as in saw: a, aw, au-e, augh, o, and ough.

Language Skills

1. To identify verb phrases with direct objects.

The students don't yet know that an exercise in compound words is in their immediate future, but they will come to suspect it when, after a little chat with the teacher about friendship, they start seeing compound words written on the board and are asked to define them from the "two little words" that make them up.

Next they get a shot at inheritance and salutation. They are told to look up inheritance in the Glossary and have explained to them by the teacher a few physical characteristics one gets from one's parents. There are also some suggestions

of what the teacher "might want to do." These suggestions are printed in blue. Great, this next part is optional. The teacher might want to tell the children that heir and heritage come from the same Latin root, and about property inheritance. Well, somebody might, but I suspect, few would be extremely eager to do so.

Now we are back to the black print, and the students get to pronounce salutation together. Ah ha, choral speaking, and are told that it means to say "hello." Note, it isn't even suggested that the teacher might want to ask one of the children what the word means. Here, again, are some "might-want-to-in-blue-ink-ideas," which include the opening of a letter, as in "Dear Sir," and another Latin lesson.

Now comes a chance at another list of thirteen board-words (bored kids too), which are "action words or verbs," and guess what we do with them. Right. More choral speaking for all thirteen of them. Next, the children get to "listen" to seven sentences (the teacher either has writer's cramp by now or does not have an eraser.) "Each sentence will contain a verb that is a synonym for one of the words on the board. Tell me which word is the synonym."

At long last, the hearty survivors are about to get a chance to come to grips with the first seven pages of Charlotte. All that is left is the "Reading and Reflecting" part. The teacher says, "Let's read the introduction aloud to begin the story. What have we found out so far about Wilbur? Is he a little boy? (No.)" Please note the arrogant assumption of the teacher's stupidity evidenced by giving them the answers in parentheses. "What information is given in the introduction that tells that Wilbur is an animal? (He eats scraps, he was sold to Fern's uncle, he lives in a pen near other animals.) Do you know what kind of animal Wilbur is? How do you know this? (Pupils can probably surmise from the illustrations that Wilbur is a pig.) How is Wilbur feeling when the story begins? (Lonely and in search of a new friend.)

Now continue reading to discover what new friend Wilbur meets. Read to find out:

"Where does Charlotte live?

What does Charlotte eat?

How does Wilbur feel about his new friend?"

All of this lead-in occupies far more time than the reading of the first seven pages of Charlotte, and the "after-reading" exercises take even more. Sorry to report that the exerpt gets only as far as to hint at the story's complication.

Surely the point is obvious, few of the stated objectives and the accompanying exercises do much to help the pleasure seeking reading. Even the ones that do are embedded in so much irrelevance that the hope of gaining any pleasure from the selection is a forlorn one. Where, oh where is the teacher's edition that even once suggests, "Tell the children to just rare back and try to enjoy the story."

Perhaps the saddest of all commentary concerning the foregoing is that thousands and thousands of precious hours are wasted by such mindlessness and thousands and thousands of children, as well as teachers, are discouraged from reading for pleasure.

Now to the sixth point. The chances for reading for pleasure in the '80s appear grim, not only because the reading systems have become enshrouded by pedagogical mythology, but because reading systems are big business. Big spelled in multi-millions of dollars. Those millions of bucks aren't going to quietly fold their hands, push back from the poker table, and slink off into the night, never more to be heard from.

No, indeed! The champions of reading systems are everywhere. Who, beside the publishers are some of them? They come from every rank:

* Children who figure reading sure must be a good school subject because it's so boring.
* Teachers who say the basals are the only way to teach; or who find it the easiest (read "least responsible") way to teach; or teachers who simply don't know any other way.
* Principals who find its an easy way to check on whether or not the teacher is "keeping up."
* Supervisors who now justify their existence by holding workshops on schwa sounds.
* Superintendents who are so busy writing reports and politicing that they don't have time for matters dealing with teaching-learning situations.
* Tax-paying parents and other concerned members of the public who would rather be hood-winked than face grim reality.
* And, college professors, well-meaning as they are, who write the college textbooks, become senior authors of the basals, and teach their students that The One and Only True Way begins with level one and ends with however many levels his or her particular system ends with.

This has become a long bill of indictment. It could be much longer but neither my time nor your patience permits.

Let me try to answer the challenge that some may make, since it is always expected that the person who identifies maladies should have remedies at hand. Here are a few that I believe will help cut through the Gordian Knot of the Reading Systems. The most important of which relates to where to start and when?

The answer is simply to start everywhere and at once! How?

1. Give teachers who want to break the systems all the moral, professional, and financial support that can be mustered. Give them encouragement to ignore the systems and do what makes sense, time to get their acts together, and sincere praise for their successes. Let them be professionals. Insist

that they become professional. Give them the freedom to succeed or to fail. Get rid of the dead wood, the petrified trees that fall across tens of thousands of children who might have learned the pleasures of reading.

It is amazing that this country's teachers have more years of professional training than their counterparts anywhere else in the world and yet we increasingly limit the range of their professional expertise.

2. Make a salary differential for successful pioneers. Most of us increase our cadance when money calls the tune.
3. Give teachers who aren't quite ready to make the move, but who want to, a short grace period--a year at most--to get ready.
4. Make sure children have the time, the physical and human environment, and the reading materials needed to insure that a vast majority will find pleasure in their reading. Create structures within the school that are conducive to this end.
5. Restructure teacher education curriculums to help our would-be teachers learn that, though no one ever promised them it would be easy, teaching, even though it is hard work, can be the most rewarding and pleasure-full of all professions.
6. Stop counting teacher failures! Instead, count teacher <u>successes</u>. Ours is the most guilt ridden of all professions. All other professionals are expected to win some and lose some. Ours is the only profession in which we are expected to win them all.
7. Abolish those chambers of gloom and doom we emphatically call the teachers' lounge. More spirits are broken there than anywhere else in the rest of the system of education.

8. Let parents and public know what we're doing. Point out the inherent wisdom of it, solicit their help, and proudly show them the consequences of our endeavors--children who read for the pleasure of it.
9. Stop using pleasure reading selections to teach the mechanics of reading, as the reading systems presently do. What an absolutely ingenious way of killing reading pleasure. I often ask God's forgiveness for complaining about Dick and Jane and their assorted brethren and sisteren, which offered only insipid content. At least when children were learning from them, they knew they weren't really reading.
10. Let's stop pretending that children can't learn to ride a bicycle until they have learned the nomenclature of its various parts, and have mastered the theory of equilibrium.

Can it be done? Or, is this just another castle in the sky? I am convinced that it can be done! And I'm optimistic enough to believe that if enough of us move together from wherever we are, the future of reading for pleasure will be brighter than ever before.

Remember, it is the teachers of this world who have always made the difference.